

EMERGING DISABILITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL: DIFFICULTIES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

*Man's greatness lies...in his decision
to be stronger than his condition.*

Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*



SYLVAIN LE MAY
President
AQICESH*

In June 2009, the Quebec government amended certain legislation,¹ as well as its *À Part Entière: Pour un Véritable Exercice du Droit à l'Égalité* [Full Citizenship: For a Genuine Exercise of the Right to Equality] policy, with a view to ensuring that, in a decade or so, disabled individuals would be able to participate in society to a much greater extent. If Quebec society is to meet the objectives of this policy, it will have to be more:

1. Inclusive

Quebec society as a whole must tackle the problems of prejudice and discrimination, and systematically take account of the disabled in any design of the physical or social environment.

2. Supportive and equitable

The goal here is enhanced labour-force access and reduced poverty for the disabled.

3. Respectful of the choices and needs of the disabled and their families

It is hoped that the disabled will become more involved in making the decisions affecting them, and that properly structured support services will be made available.

The abovementioned policy advocates a better standard of living and higher educational levels for disabled individuals, as well as improved labour-force access. In this regard, the *Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* provides for the right to “use...any means to palliate a handicap” (see the article in this issue on a recent opinion handed down by the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse).

To date, universities have been able to accommodate students with “traditional” disabilities such as motor, sensory and organic impairments. They must now do the same for “emerging student populations”—i.e., students with learning disabilities (LD), attention deficit disorders (with or without hyperactivity)

(ADD/ADHD), pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) and serious mental-health problems. Because the number of these students is growing, the time has come to reflect on how to assist the various parties involved.

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

The Quebec university network includes 17 members of the Association québécoise interuniversitaire des conseillers aux étudiants en situation de handicap (AQICESH) [Quebec Inter-University Association of Counsellors for Disabled Students].² At present, 3,971 university students are receiving support services; of that number, 58% can be classified as having “emerging” disabilities. This is an unprecedented situation, and the university community must adapt in order to meet society's expectations regarding the treatment of these students. Doing so, however, will involve a number of difficulties. We discuss seven of these below, together with possible solutions.

THE COLLEGE - UNIVERSITY TRANSITION

Getting used to university life represents a challenge for any student. For those with “emerging” handicaps, however, that challenge is even greater. It is therefore vital that the needs of these students be recognized, so they can receive the necessary support during the college-university transition. As things now stand, information exchanged between colleges and universities is practically non-existent. For universities, implementing proactive, inclusive measures for disabled students is problematic, as there is actually no official disclosure mechanism allowing them to obtain the related diagnoses and individual education plans established by the colleges.

— A project to facilitate the inter-level transition for disabled students is now being conducted (see “Overview of an Inter-Level Project: New Disabled-Student Populations” in this issue).

* Association québécoise interuniversitaire des conseillers aux étudiants en situation de handicap

¹ Bill 56, an Act to Amend the Act to Secure the Handicapped in the Exercise of Their Rights and Other Legislative Provisions, brought changes to the Act to Secure the Handicapped in the Exercise of their Rights, including a change in the title, which is now the Act to Secure Handicapped Persons in the Exercise of their Rights with a View to Achieving Social, School and Workplace Integration (R.S.Q. c. E-20.1).

² [www.aqicesh.ca]



PREJUDICE

“Are we giving out diplomas at a discount?” “These students just aren’t made for college or university.” Prejudiced views such as these affect our perception of disabled students and make the goal of inclusive education more difficult to reach.

Non-disabled students must be made aware of the circumstances and challenges faced by their disabled classmates. Similarly, the entire university community must understand that it has an obligation to accommodate and support these individuals. Such efforts must mobilize all stakeholders: student and staff services, university faculties and administration must all contribute.

A positive start would be to adopt a resolutely inclusive approach. This is the goal of the universal-access model (see related article in this issue).

LACK OF SUPPORT FOR FACULTY

Faculty regularly complain about a lack of support when dealing with students with “emerging” disabilities, saying that their knowledge of the problems involved is lacking, that they do not really have a grasp of the challenges faced by these students or the effects of disabilities on the learning process. They also stress the importance of access to proven instructional tools that would enable them to deal with the situations they are required to manage.

Educators must therefore receive professional-development assistance in the form of continuing education and educational resources (teaching guides, instructional materials, methods, Websites, etc.) that would help them, not only to better understand the difficulties faced by these students, but, more especially, to feel less isolated and unprepared for the challenges in question (see the article on resource teachers in this issue). Such support and tools should also be designed to lighten their workload.

LACK OF REQUIRED RESOURCES

All stakeholders currently bemoan the lack of human resources required to: (1) meet the demands of special-needs students directly affecting their inclusion and chances of success; and (2) ensure the effectiveness of the support and accommodation measures proposed.

In order for the necessary physical and human resources to be deployed, student services must be sufficiently funded. The addition of resource teachers and neuropsychologists is paramount in this regard. The increase in the number of special-needs students has created considerable pressure on

the academic community, and calls for timely adjustments. Universities must also acknowledge student services as key partners in the inclusion process; the expertise provided by these services, as well as the interface and catalyst roles they play, can be a significant force in establishing the synergy required for that inclusion, from the very first day of classes through labour-force entry. As regards effectiveness, the measures that prove most conclusive, as well as classroom techniques that maximize disabled students’ potential for success, will have to be determined, both intrinsically and extrinsically.

THE SCHOOL - WORK TRANSITION

Another difficulty is integration into the labour force. Except for programs that involve internships, universities offer little in the way of support for disabled students in their transition to the world of employment. Furthermore, after investing considerable time, energy and effort in successfully completing their studies, students with “emerging” disabilities still face the problems of finding a job, and are very often disillusioned about the possibilities available.

To facilitate that transition, closer relations with the agencies concerned (for example, job-search organizations such as the Regroupement des organismes spécialisés en employabilité auprès des personnes handicapées (ROSEPH) [Association of Agencies Working to Enhance the Employability of the Disabled]) should be developed.

In 2011, the Office des personnes handicapées published a document aimed at making that transition easier.³

FUNDING FOR SERVICES

The funding formula for providing services to the disabled is not the same for colleges and universities. Each CÉGEP is given a comprehensive envelope that takes account of the needs of students with “emerging” disabilities. At the university level, however, disabled students receive direct funding via the Allowance for Special Needs Program, which forms part of the Student Financial Assistance Program offered by the Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir and du Sport (MELS) [Department of Education, Recreation and Sport]. Unfortunately, while the Allowance for Special Needs Program provides direct funding to “traditional” disabled populations, this is not the case for students with “emerging” disabilities, with the latter group suffering from the related adverse impact on service delivery.

³ [http://www.ophq.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/documents/1248_Transition_etudes_postsecondaires-emploi_Edite.pdf]



Consistency and continuity in service delivery are essential if we hope to promote the inclusion as well as the academic success of disabled students. As this is extremely challenging, however, given current funding models, the latter should be reviewed.

THE DIAGNOSTIC PROCESS

At university, funding is granted to students who are able to produce a medical certificate attesting to their disability—i.e., to a “major functional disability or other deficiency”.⁴ However, “emerging” disabilities only rarely lead to such recognition, and if a student is unable to prove his or her disability to the satisfaction of the MELS, service delivery between college and university will be interrupted.

The MELS requirement for medical confirmation should be re-examined, and include all disabilities; this would allow students from “emerging” populations to receive services in line with their needs and circumstances.

Such action would also make it possible for professionals other than physicians—e.g., psychologists, neuropsychologists, guidance counsellors and speech-language pathologists who belong to professional bodies—to make an official diagnosis that would be accepted by the Allowance for Special Needs Program. This would simplify and expedite the process involved, not only in needs assessment, but also in individual education and accommodation plan development and implementation.

While [educational] standards cannot be compromised, the path taken to meet them can be adjusted in keeping with the needs and circumstances in question.

CONCLUSION

At the same time, it is vital that disabled students identify, not with a given service, but rather, like their classmates, with a particular faculty and university. We believe that educational institutions have everything to gain by developing this important aspect of social inclusion—an objective that will have to take account of the legislative framework and the views of faculty, who are in charge of ensuring that educational standards are maintained. While those standards cannot be compromised, the path taken to meet them can be adjusted in keeping with the needs and circumstances in question.

If access to education and academic success for the disabled in an inclusive environment is to become a reality, a synergistic mechanism involving all intra-institutional, inter-level

and inter-network partners will have to be established. Each higher-education structure concerned with the social inclusion of disabled individuals—including those with “emerging” disabilities—must help make the experience of these students a positive one.

Thanks to the skills of the disabled individuals graduating from universities, these institutions, as well as society as a whole, will profit by such action. accepting diversity is definitely a measure of success in every respect. ♦

REFERENCES

OFFICE DES PERSONNES HANDICAPÉES DU QUÉBEC. (1984). *À part égale... l'intégration sociale des personnes handicapées: un défi pour tous*. Drummondville: Publications du Québec.

OFFICE DES PERSONNES HANDICAPÉES DU QUÉBEC. (2011). *La transition des études post-secondaires vers le marché de l'emploi*. Drummondville: Government of Quebec. Background paper.

Sylvain LE MAY is very involved in integrating the disabled into the university community. In addition to being responsible for disabled-student intake and support at the Université du Québec à Montréal, he is a member of the “Intégrer les Nouvelles Populations Étudiantes en Situation de Handicap aux Études Supérieures: Mission Possible!” [Integrating New Disabled-Student Populations at University: Mission Possible!] inter-level committee.

lemay.sylvain@uqam.ca

The author wishes to thank Carole Lavallée, associate academic director, CÉGEP du Vieux Montréal, and Nicole Bonenfant, student advisory services director, UQAM, for their input on this article.

⁴ Section 47 of the *Regulation Respecting Financial Assistance for Education Expenses* (R.R.Q., c. A-13.3) defines specific medical criteria for “severe visual deficiency”, “severe hearing deficiency”, “motor deficiency” and “organic deficiency”. Section 48 also stipulates that “any major functional deficiency must be attested to in a medical certificate.”